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A Key Witness

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Once upon a time Earl Browder was America's number-one Communist. In 1946, after nearly 17 years of service as general secretary of the Communist Party, he became the victim of the Russian-ruled machine he had led. On a signal from Moscow, transmitted by French hatchet-man Jacques Duclos, the Communist National Committee expelled him "for betraying the principles of Marxism-Leninism and deserting to the side of the class enemy—American monopoly capital."

In retrospect this gibberish has some momentous meaning. For it was Moscow's announcement that the era of U. S.-Russian collaboration was over, that the cold war was on and that "Browderism," a premature form of Khrushchevism, was the deadly heresy.

And so the man who had been the local Communist hero throughout the Popular Front heyday of the 1930s, who remained at his post during the Nazi-Soviet pact and reassembled the Communist legions for the "all-out war effort" when Hitler turned on Stalin, was ruthlessly discarded. His real crime was in clinging to the view that the wartime alliance should be preserved, and that the U. S. Communists should not embark on a crusade against the Truman Administration. Stalin had reverted to the old course; Browder's head had to roll.

Now he is 72 years old. He has three sons, all of them engaged in mathematical research. He has four grandchildren and two more on the way. His hair is graying, his manner is mellow, and he has no dreams of any personal political future.

"I suppose," he remarks whimsically, "that if I had been executed by Stalin in 1946, I would be rehabilitated now." Yet he seems remarkably free of bitterness, frustration or dogmatism. When one asks him whether he has contemplated writing his memoirs, he brushes aside the inquiry by saying that he doubts anyone would care, and that he is more interested in the future of his grandchildren than in the exploration of his own past.

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This congenial Kansan who so long provided a native face for the Soviet-run Communist operation here leads a quiet, modest existence in Yonkers. His alleged desertion to "American monopoly capital" has brought him no conspicuous financial dividends. He has never exploited his Bolshevik career through lurid memoirs, nor has he abandoned his belief in the ultimate validity of the socialist concept. But he is convinced that new and great economic changes will come, not through the plottings of any radical sect, but through the pragmatic processes of U. S. politics.

What is more important is his view of the Russian-Chinese conflict. To this issue he brings special knowledge and background; it is a relief to report that a few weeks ago, representatives of a U. S. intelligence agency finally came to him to solicit his opinions. For Browder was not merely a long-time figure in the Communist world, who knows the names and numbers of most of the players without a scorecard. In the late 1920s he was a Comintern emissary in China. He can speak with a certain informed authority, unlike most of those who have minimized the dimensions of the Moscow-Peking struggle.

It is Browder's belief that this clash is one of the great turning points in history; that it is a life-and-death struggle for leadership of the Communist world; and that there is no serious prospect of any sudden reconciliation.

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He does not believe the U. S. should exhibit any strident public partisanship for Khrushchev's position because "that would not be helpful." But he believes we—and the rest of humanity—have a vast stake in the outcome of this internal Communist war, and that those who deride the clash as simply a "dispute about how to bury us" are missing the central point. Overwhelming Senate approval of the nuclear test treaty, he suggests, could be a crucial event because the shadow of nuclear terror is most acutely felt in Asia and Africa, where the Chinese Communists are making their most aggressive bid. If the treaty were to be repudiated here, or even ratified by a narrow margin, Peking's "hard-liners" would inevitably gain new ground.

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There will be those who say Browder's words must be suspect because he was for so long a Communist dignitary. Presumably that explains why it took all agencies of the U. S. government so long to seek his views. But, in this matter, it is hard to imagine a more expert opinion. One might even argue that a man who occupied so high a position in the Communist hierarchy might be a more informed consultant, in this time of turmoil in the Communist world, than some of the CIA analysts who were in baby carriages when Browder was in China.

But he is not a man looking for such a job. He reads a lot; he is engaged in a chess-game-by-correspondence with a London friend; he is still very much in this world but he is not committed to the notion that he has an indispensable mission to change it. He has many interesting things to say on many subjects. But, in a way, the most interesting thing about Earl Browder is that he has so plainly adjusted himself to the awareness that he will not loom large in the history books. One nevertheless retains the hope that the government will make larger use of his knowledge in a time when ignorance so often compounds our world troubles.